

Me and My Shadows



By

Craig S. MacCormack

Introduction:

Growing up in Ottawa, Canada, during the 1960s and 1970s was a time of simple pleasures, establishing lifelong friendships, and unforgettable experiences. It was a time when the world seemed both smaller and larger at the same time, when the bonds of family and community were strong, and the zeitgeist of those times shaped our lives in unique ways.

As I start my sixty-eighth year of revolving around the Sun, four more of my closest lifelong friends have fallen off the ride these past three years, leaving me to recall our days of youth. But, looking back on those years now, I realize that almost all of the people who filled my world during that time and throughout my life, have become shadows. They have passed away, leaving behind cherished memories and stories that deserve to be shared. That's why I decided to write this book as an anthology of autobiographical anecdotes — to capture the essence of those times, to relive the laughter and the tears, to honor the people who left an indelible mark on my life and to make them immortal.

In these pages, you will find humorous and sentimental tales that reflect the joys and challenges of growing up in Ottawa during a time of great social and cultural change. From childhood escapades and misadventures with lifelong friends to heartwarming moments with family and the trials and tribulations of navigating the world as a young person, these stories capture the essence of a generation and a place.

But this book is not just about nostalgia. It is about the power of human connection, the enduring bonds of friendship, and the profound impact of the people who have come and gone in our lives. It is a celebration of the shared life experiences that bind us together, even as time marches on and loved ones pass away.

So, come join me on this journey down memory lane on Howden Avenue, and Ottawa's Nepean suburbs. Let us remember the shadows who have left their imprints on our hearts and minds and let us cherish the moments that made us who we are today. I hope that these stories will make you laugh, reminisce, and perhaps even shed a tear or two. And, most importantly, I hope that they will inspire you to cherish the memories and stories of your own past, and to celebrate the people who have touched your life in ways that will never be forgotten.

With the deepest gratitude for the people who have shaped my life and the memories that live on, I present to you — **Me and My Shadows**.

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The Babysitter

When my family moved from Mailes Avenue into the newly built brick bungalow on Howden Avenue, I was just shy of two years of age and my mother pregnant with my sister. It would become the beginnings of my life memories.

My two older brothers, Jamie eight, and Terry, thirteen at the time, were adjusting to being uprooted from their old schools and friends. Terry, being the eldest youth on the street in a new suburban area, and most of the new homeowners being young couples with toddlers, found himself becoming quite popular in his new environs. As told to me by my mother, and later confirmed by Terry himself, he was famous for being the new neighborhood's babysitter. Parents would flock to him whenever they needed a night out, and he'd always oblige with a smile on his face. He babysat for a lot of the families, Pranschke, McMonagle, Awrey to name a few, watching kids who would later become my friends and schoolmates.

One fateful evening at the Awrey residence next door, Terry was tasked with watching over a particularly rambunctious two-year-old boy named Michael, and his three-year-old brother, Derek. As the night wore on, Terry found himself getting increasingly drowsy, his eyelids getting heavier with each passing moment, so he put the boys to bed. He then walked into the living-room and before he knew it, he had dozed off watching television.

But little did Terry know, Michael was a master of mischief, a two-year-old Houdini with a sweet tooth. He awoke, waddled his way to the kitchen and spotted a canister of brown sugar left on the table, which, as any self-respecting toddler would know, is basically the Holy Grail of sugary delights.

Without a second thought, Michael plunged his tiny hand into the jar and began shoveling brown sugar into his mouth. He ate and ate until he had nearly polished off the entire canister of the stuff, and then promptly passed out on the kitchen floor, surrounded by a sea of sugar.

Meanwhile, Terry was still snoring away in the living room, blissfully unaware of the sugar-fueled chaos having unfolded just a few feet away. It wasn't until Michael's parents arrived home making a ruckus, that Terry woke up, groggy and disoriented.

He stumbled into the kitchen and was greeted with a sight that would make any confectioner weep. There was Michael, sprawled out on the floor, his eyes closed and sugar all over his face. Terry couldn't believe what he was seeing and was completely flummoxed as to how a two-year-old could consume that much sugar.

Sadly, word of Terry's slip-up soon spread throughout the neighborhood, and parents began to think twice about leaving their precious little ones in his care. Terry's babysitting reputation fell like a lead balloon, and he was left with nothing to do but ponder his sugar-coated mistake. In the end, Michael was okay, albeit a little hyper, and his parents couldn't help but chuckle at the sight of their son covered in sugar. But for Terry, he could smile. The memory of that fateful night would release him from the bondage of babysitting and allow him his teenage freedom.

To Bee, Or Not To Bee

It was a sunny warm summer's day in 1962, and I, a five-year-old bursting with curiosity, found a swarm of bees buzzing in a small evergreen under my parents' bedroom window. Our bungalow on Howden Avenue hummed with the ordinary sounds of an Ottawa-Nepean suburb, but I was after something extraordinary.

My little sister Janet, three at the time, sat on the front steps, watching me like a hawk. Usually, I'd be the one tattling on her for stuffing stones into her mouth or wandering off, as per Mom's orders. But today, I was the troublemaker.

"I've never been stung before," I said to Janet.

"I wanna know what it feels like. I'm gonna stand by that tree and make those bees mad." I told her.

Janet, wise beyond her years, sensed trouble and bolted inside to snitch to our mother.

Determined, I tried everything to rile those bees. I threw sticks, jumped, even spat at them, but they just buzzed on, unbothered. Then I remembered a Looney Tunes cartoon where a man blew on a bee, and it went wild. So, I puckered up and blew hard on one. Sure enough, that bee got mad as hell! It zoomed at me and stung my right hand. It hurt, but not enough to cry. I was too curious.

I blew on another bee, and it stung my left forearm. By now, the swarm was circling me like I was a bucket of nectar. That was when Mom came running out, scooped me up, and carried me inside.

Mom, an Army Nurse from World War II, knew her stuff. She plucked out the stingers and dabbed salve on my wounds.

"I figured you'd be bawling after those stings!" she said, half-amused.

"I wanted to know what it's like, Mom. Now I do." I grinned in reply.

It was clear, I had an unquenchable curiosity and determination to learn and understand the world around me. Something my older brother Jamie would notice and pour his knowledge on me like it was water, and I was a dry sponge.

Over the years, I'd learn life has its own stings, sharper than any bee's. But like those stings, they're proof you're living.

The Pecci-Cut

Brooklane Public School on Meadowlands Drive was a small brick fortress of routine in 1964, where the days ticked by with the precision of a metronome. Grade two brought a new teacher, Mrs. Houston, a middle-aged schoolmarm who ruled our classroom like a hawk perched on a high branch. Her sharp eyes and pinched lips demanded silence, her mantra clear: children should be seen, never heard. Raise your hand or face her wrath. She was the opposite of Mrs. Beach, our grade one teacher, whose warmth wrapped us like a quilt, her grandmotherly kindness making us feel like cherished kin.

My crew — Ross Freeman, the Smith twins Jeff and Jim, Mike Patrick, and a few others — had been together since kindergarten, a tight pack navigating the schoolyard's unwritten rules. But that autumn, a new kid walked into our lives:

John Donald, seven years old, like me, with a quick grin and a spark in his eyes that said he was up for anything. We clicked instantly, two peas in a pod, trading jokes and secrets like we'd known each other forever.

Every morning, mid-way through lessons, came the milk break. A crate of small, waxy cartons — eight ounces each — would appear at the classroom door. Mrs. Houston would herd us from our desks to sit in a circle on the floor at the front of the room, sipping quietly while she retreated to her desk, nose buried in papers, her stern faces a warning against chatter. We'd whisper anyway, me and John side by side, plotting mischief or giggling over nothing.

One morning, about a month into the school year, milk break took a turn. I sat cross-legged, carton in hand, when a sudden, urgent need hit me. I had to pee. Badly. I shot my hand up, the obedient shy kid I was, waiting for Mrs. Houston to notice. She didn't. Her head stayed down, her pen scratching away, oblivious to my growing panic. Minutes dragged on, each one tighter than the last, my bladder screaming. My arm ached, trembling from the effort of staying raised. I couldn't speak out — Mrs. Houston's rules were iron-clad, and I was too scared to break them.

Finally, my arm collapsed, and with it, my control. A warm flood spread beneath me, soaking my pants. I froze, horrified, as the puddle grew, a shallow pond around me on the linoleum floor.

"Craig's peeing all over the floor!" John's voice rang out, loud and gleeful, as he leapt up, laughing, dodging the mess.

The circle erupted. Kids scrambled away, giggling, pointing. Ross smirked, Jeff and Jim hooted, Mike's eyes went wide. I wanted to shrink, to disappear, to be knee-high to a snake's chin and slither away unseen. My face burned as the laughter echoed.

Mrs. Houston snapped upright, her glare slicing through the chaos. “John Donald! Watch your language!” she barked, more annoyed at the disruption than my predicament. Then, turning to me, her voice sharp:

“Craig, why didn’t you tell me you needed to go?”

“I had my hand up,” I mumbled, voice barely a whisper. “Couldn’t hold it up anymore.”

She didn’t apologize, didn’t soften. Instead, she grabbed newspapers, spread them over my desk’s seat, and sent me back to sit — soggy and humiliated — for nearly two hours until noon. When I got home for lunch, my mother took one look at me, heard the story, and went nuclear. She kept me home that afternoon, called the principal Mr. White, and unloaded. How dare they make her son sit in urine-soaked clothes? How dare Mrs. Houston ignore a child’s raised hand for ten minutes? What kind of woman was this to teach children?

The incident didn’t break me and John. If anything, it cemented us, two kids who’d seen each other at their rawest. But it lit a spark in me. John’s loud announcement had made me the centre of attention — embarrassed me in front of everyone. I’d get him back, somehow.

A month later, my chance came. John showed up to class wearing a cap, a new addition to his usual look. It wasn’t taboo — some boys wore caps indoors back then — but John never had. The cap was pulled low, snug, the sides nearly covering the tops of his ears. I knew something was up. A hunch told me there was a story under that hat, and milk break was the perfect time to find out.

We sat in our usual spots, cartons in hand, Mrs. Houston at her desk, ignoring us as always. I glanced at John, his cap still firmly in place. My right hand moved fast, grabbing the bill of his cap and yanking it off. It flew forward, landing between his knees on the floor.

The room exploded in laughter. John’s head was a shock — barely a trace of hair. Not a crew-cut, not a brush-cut, but a shave so close it was less than stubble, less than a five o’clock shadow. His scalp gleamed under the fluorescent lights, a stark contrast to the brown mop he’d had before. Ross doubled over, the twins howled, Mike gaped. John’s face went red, but he grinned, snatching his cap back and jamming it on.

“Nice haircut!” I teased, and the circle roared again.

Later, John spilled the story. An Italian kid he’d played with, who lived near his house, had invited him over. The kid’s dad, Mr. Pecci, was giving his son a haircut and asked John if he wanted one. John, easygoing as ever, said sure. Mr. Pecci told him to call home for permission, and John’s dad gave the okay. But when John got home, his parents’ jaws dropped, their reaction mirroring our class’s. The cut was so severe it was practically a scalp tattoo.

Such moments, like this cap-yanking reveal, became legend between us. Over the decades, we’d retell it, laugh till our sides hurt, and call this one for what it was: The Pecci-Cut.

John and I, through the milk breaks, the mishaps, and the mischief, built a friendship that would stick.

The Love Tree

The shadows of 1966 stretched long across the streets of my Ottawa neighborhood, where the air smelled of fresh-cut grass and the leaves hinted at autumnal blush, signaling September's start of another school year. I was nine, turning ten in January, and the world was a kaleidoscope of mysteries I couldn't yet name. That was the year Mr. Shaver, my first male teacher, strode into our Grade Four classroom at Brooklane Public School, brush-cut hair, his tie always slightly askew, his voice a warm baritone as he even brought his acoustic guitar every Friday to strum and sing folk songs. But it wasn't Mr. Shaver who tilted my world off its axis. It was Luanne Johnson.

She sat in front of me, her blonde hair catching the sunlight that slanted through the classroom windows, each strand a golden thread weaving a spell I didn't understand. I was smitten, though I'd never have used that word then, nor had I seen Disney's Bambi to realize I was "Twitterpated" as described in the movie. My heart, that clumsy, untested thing, thumped a rhythm I couldn't decipher, and Luanne became the center of my orbit. I was too shy to speak to her, too young to know why her laugh made my stomach twist like a kite caught in a gust. All I knew was that she was there, and I was not the same.

My bike became my chariot, its wheels humming as I pedaled up and down Donna Street, like a pilgrim circling a sacred shrine. I had no plan, no purpose beyond the hope of glimpsing her — maybe she'd be tossing a ball in her yard, skipping, or hopscotching down her laneway. It was instinct, raw and relentless, like a salmon fighting its way upstream. I couldn't explain it, but I was hooked.

The Smith boys, fraternal twins, Jim and Jeff, who lived six houses down from Luanne, caught on quick. They'd lean against their fence, smirking.

"Craig's in love," Jim would shout, and Jeff would snicker.

Soon, John, Joe, and Ross joined the chorus, their taunts becoming an anthem. Joe, the ringleader, would belt out that old tease, his voice high and gleeful:

"Craig and Luanne, sitting in a tree,

K-i-s-s-i-n-g.

First comes love,

Then comes marriage,

Then comes Craig with the baby carriage."

I'd turn red as a fire hydrant, denying it with all the bluster a prepubescent boy could muster.

“Shut up, I don’t!” I’d snap, kicking at the gravel, but my protests only fueled their laughter.

Inside, I was a tangle of shame and yearning, caught in a dilemma I didn’t have the words for. To like a girl was to invite ridicule, yet to feel what I felt was to be alive in a way I’d never been before.

Then came the day after the Easter Monday holiday, Mr. Shaver stood at the front, his tie more crooked than usual, and announced that Luanne was moving. To Zambia, Africa, of all places — a name so foreign it might as well have been the moon. And next week. The words hit like a punch, and my childhood world, so small and certain, crumbled. A going-away party was planned, but I barely heard the details. My chest ached, a new kind of pain I couldn’t name, sharp and hollow all at once.

That night, alone in my room, I took my pocketknife to my work desk, carving ‘LUANNE’ into the wood with slow, deliberate strokes. Each letter was a vow, a way to hold onto her when she was already slipping away.

Weeks later, in the Woodroffe woods across from Norice Avenue, I went to the love tree — a gnarled oak where older kids carved their sweethearts’ names. There, with the same knife, I carved her name again, the bark splintering under my blade. The act felt sacred, a secret between me and the shadows of the forest.

Her last day at school was a blur of forced smiles and paper-plates sticky with cake. That night, I lay in bed and cried, the first tears I’d shed for something other than a scraped knee or firecracker burn. This pain was much stranger, and it tethered me to her, even as she vanished across the world.

The teasing faded, as teasing does. The school year ended, and municipal politics shuffled me and a few classmates to City View Public School for grades five and six. Life moved on, as it always does, but Luanne stayed lodged in me, a splinter of memory that never worked its way out. To this day, the word Zambia is a time machine, pulling me back to that spring of 1967, to a blonde-haired girl, and a boy who didn’t yet know what it meant to love, or to lose.

I made a promise as I carved her name, a boy’s oath sworn in the quiet of a wounded heart: I would never forget. And I haven’t. She was my first awakening, my first shadow, and she lingers still, carved into the tree of my soul.

Confederation High School

I was just 2 months into my first year of High School attending my Grade 9 science class. Instead of desks there were lab stations with two stools for each paired student, a rectangular countertop with a porcelain sink mounted in the middle, and a water faucet with a tall inverted "J"-shaped spout with a long thin rubber hose hanging down to discharge the water. There was an experiment planned, and the apparatus needed was already setup by the previous class which was standard practice. Each lab station had an alcohol lamp/burner, a glass container with alcohol inside affixed with a screw top lid with a rope-like wick protruding up from the centre, and with the remaining length down into the alcohol. Basically, an alcohol fueled candle.

The experiment was on distillation so the burners would be used for heating contents inside test-tubes and flasks. My lab partner was a female and the two behind us were both females as well. When everyone was underway with their experiments with liquids bubbling away, making observations and taking notes, the teacher left the room.

A few minutes later from the lab station behind me, I heard a clunk type sound and a loud shriek. I turned around to see that the alcohol lamp had been knocked over on its side. The shriek was because whoever was supposed to refill the lamp and screw its lid down in the previous class, had left it loose. The contents had spilled liquid fire on their countertop, and it was flowing towards the girl directly behind me.

I instantly used my right hand like a squeegee pushing the spill into the sink telling the girls to turn the water on. After about 5 seconds of frantic hand movements the counter was clear but then the girl yelled —

"Your hand is on fire!"

I quickly grabbed the rubber hose with my left hand and put my right hand covered in blue flames from the alcohol, into the sink. How I wished for a normal faucet as it was like trying to put a campfire out by pissing on it. By the time I had flushed my hand with the small pathetic stream of water from that hose, my fingers were a lovely pinkish-red color, much like the start of a sunburn. The pain wasn't too bad and aside from the fingers of my right hand being redder than normal, I felt pretty much unscathed from my actions.

When the teacher came in a few minutes later, the class quickly told him what happened and what I had done. He told me to go to the nurse's office which I did and on my way there I noticed the pain was really starting to grow. The only other burn experience I had was with little ones from playing with firecrackers when younger, but this had all four fingers of the right hand turning redder, pain rising incrementally, as the minutes passed. The nurse basically looked at my hand and said she was calling my mother at home to inform her about the incident and to come and get me.

I ended up staying home for a week and my mother tended to the burns which blistered and needed regular lancing which she did. I really did not feel like returning to school at all and dreaded having to do so but my mother was a first aid nurse in the second world war and had me back at school the next week with a right hand that was wrapped like an Egyptian mummy with gauze.

During my absence from school the rumor mill was obviously in full force as students would come up to me saying they thought I was burned all over, or heard my face and hair caught fire etc. I was now uncomfortable. Not only was I self-conscious about the incident and bandaged hand, but I was now the centre of attention from gossip and rumors amongst the entire student body. Not an extrovert by any means, this only added to my anxiety from the burn alone. The only fringe benefit to it all was for the rest of my first year of High School I did not have to write exams or take notes because I physically could not hold a pen or pencil until the summer.

Pineglen Pining

Ken, Jeff, and I, were sitting in a small, wooded area, by the dead-end on Miriam Avenue in Pineglen, where the Jordan sisters lived. The two attended Confederation high school where Ken, in tenth grade, and I in ninth grade, also went. He had a crush on Denise, and I on her younger sister Robi, but we suspected that they were way out of our league. Still, we were quite adept at clandestine pining. I know that has an odor of masochism about it. Indeed, two pathetic teenage romantics, dreaming of a chance, but with no intention, or the testosterone to act, would suggest it was!

It was Saturday night, just after dusk in mid-September 1971. We had walked for an hour to get there from Jeff's, and he and I were each carrying a bottle of 'Old Sailor' port-sherry. It was to be our first experience with alcohol inebriation, or in hindsight, alcohol poisoning. Meanwhile, Ken had brought two grams of Blonde Lebanese hash, or a 'Dime' it was called due to costing ten dollars. First time any of us saw and handled the stuff. As we settled in, Jeff and I started to drink down the sherry while Ken began his neophyte experience with hash, trying to figure out how to smoke it without having rolling papers to roll a spliff.

After several failed ideas and attempts, a sudden epiphany struck Ken when he discovered that small pieces of the hash would stick and smolder on the end of a lit cigarette. It could then be inhaled with lips pursed a bit above it, sucking in the spiraling, thick, sweetly aromatic smoke that would rise. Jeff and I continued to drink, and Ken smoked more of his hash while chatting about our crushes, and how we wished they would notice us. As the night progressed, Jeff and I found ourselves falling deeper into the clutches of drunkenness having emptied our bottles and were finding it difficult to even stand. Meanwhile, without any alcohol, Ken seemed to be having a delightful time.

To this day, I only have flashes of memory about how Ken basically hauled us like two sacks of potatoes, carrying us like luggage the three miles back to Jeff's house on the corner of Thatcher and Howden, and down into the rec-room in the basement. Let it be said, Ken was built like the proverbial brick shithouse, stout with a classic 'V' shape from his shoulders down to his waist, making this seemingly implausible feat of strength quite plausible. You only had to see the way he'd run through, and over, attempting tacklers during the many football games we neighborhood kids often indulged in at Olmstead Park. Tackle football with no pads was the norm. Guys that knew better from experience, would simply just get out of his way when they saw a freight train with red hair and a big Afro, accelerating towards them.

The Alexander's, Jeff's parents and sister, were away at the cottage that weekend until Sunday night, so we were safe with the house to ourselves. Unfortunately, the alcohol had really taken its toll on Jeff and me. We were alternately projectile vomiting, making wobbly dashes to the basement laundry sink. Meanwhile, Ken was trying to maintain a phone conversation with John, who had provided him with the hash. I managed to get to that sink every time it was

needed, but unfortunately on one occasion, Jeff involuntarily chose himself and the couch instead.

"Hold on John, there goes another one!" I remember Ken exclaiming to John on the phone as I ran sink bound.

While Jeff and I were left to suffer the unpleasant consequences of overindulgence, Ken remained unscathed, content I suspect in the knowledge that he had chosen the superior intoxicant. But perhaps, I'm sure, also wondering why the hell Jeff and I hadn't gotten sick before, or during his long arduous expedition to get us safely back.

Eventually the spinning nausea subsided, and I would later walk the block and a half up Howden to my house. Along the way, contemplating the wisdom Ken showed in his choice of vice, and leaving me most curious to also try it on its own. It was the start of my move away from alcohol on weekends, to the finer, more enjoyable effects achieved via the assortment of hashish that was abundantly available from Morocco, Lebanon, Turkey, Nepal, Afghanistan, and India with its famous 'Indian Rope' hash being the most memorable.

Fishing Trophies

One early morning in the summer of my 15th year, I and two of my good friends, Randy and Michael, set out to fish at the Jock River, where it meets the Rideau River. It was a half hour bicycle ride from our neighborhood to Woodroffe avenue's southern end at Prince of Wales Drive, and few more minutes to eventually find ourselves eagerly standing along the riverbank. With each of us a few feet apart, Michael in the middle, Randy to the right, and I to the left, we began casting our lines with youthful abandon. Slinging out large lures hoping to catch the biggest fish in the river.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, we found ourselves snagging in the branches of the shrubbery and trees that lined the river's edge. Our lures, with their multiple treble hooks, were experts at catching not just fish, but also the foliage and limbs both above and behind us. Frustration mounted as we occasionally struggled to free our snagged lures from the branches, with Michael eventually at the epicenter of the chaos after a sharp thwacking sound indicated yet another snag.

It was at that point Michael began to curse and blindly pull with all his might, repeatedly yanking on his fishing rod putting a bend in it that was near to snapping point. It was a sight to behold, with his rod bending with maximum tension in a herculean attempt to free his lure from whatever cluster of branches, wood, leaves, it was snagged on. Following the bend of his rod and its line, I noticed that it was not snagged on a branch, as Michael believed, and the source of the sharp thwacking sound was not a tree limb. His lure, with all three treble hooks, was deeply embedded into the left side of Randy's scalp, just above his ear! Michael's repeated forceful yanking of his fishing rod was now visibly jerking Randy's head, so I hollered — **STOP!!!**

We were shaken and sobered by the severity of the situation. Randy's inability to yell was due to the stunning shock from the initial impact, which he would later liken to hitting your thumb with a hammer, and for those initial several seconds, you know it's going to hurt like a bastard, but you're not feeling anything yet. In a panic, we cut the line to free Randy's head from the fishing rod and scrambled to get Randy to the hospital. Riding our bicycles like the wind with Michael on Randy's left and me on his right. We made a sorry sight, three young lads careening down the streets, with Randy clutching at his head and Michael sweating and panting like a plough horse.

Thankfully, the doctors were able to remove the treble hooks from Randy's head without causing him any further harm and gave him a tetanus shot. As we slowly cycled back home, we were all still a bit shaken by the experience, but we couldn't help laughing about how we must have looked, and about the new fashion accessory Randy had acquired. It was a funny and frightening episode, but it taught us a valuable lesson about the potential perils of fishing, and for Randy, the perils of fishing with Michael.

Though Randy would not fish again, at least not with Michael, there was no strain put on their friendship. In fact, a few years later, the two would leave home and share a two-bedroom apartment on Baseline Road in a high-rise beside Pinecrest Cemetery.

Forty-seven years later, it's August 2019. Now both at 62 years, Randy and I are having lunch out in the patio of a restaurant in Perth. While enjoying the soup and some quality club sandwiches, we start sharing many anecdotes about Michael who'd died six years past in February of 2013. The Jock River fishing fiasco comes up with great sentiment and laughter as Randy quips —

"Yeah, if Mike were here, I'd tell him, I was the biggest fuckin' thing he ever caught!"

"And if he were here, he'd probably be tellin' ya — 'you're lucky I didn't have you fuckin' mounted!'" I replied.

Just two months later, that October of 2019, and Randy went fishing again, with Michael.

I'm left with the sentiment of an old fisherman having to release two trophy fish, worthy of a lifetime's quest, freeing them with the utmost gratitude for the encounters, as the two swim away. Shadows, under the rippling surface disappearing into the deep. Leaving their memories as proud trophies to hang on my wall.

Mezcal and A Lit Match

Like most teens in the early 1970s, Randy and I were always up for exploring new things, especially when it came to alcohol or soft drugs. So, when my eldest brother Terry offered us a taste of mezcal, we jumped at the chance. It was 1973 on a sunny day in May after getting out early from high school. We were both 16 years old and looking forward to the approaching summer break. Lounging in lawn chairs in my backyard, smoking cigarettes, chewing the fat, and enjoying the warm weather. Terry had come out of the house and asked if we wanted to try some mezcal from Mexico. He had a Mexican girlfriend and traveled back and forth to Oaxaca, so he had access to products that were unheard of in Canada at that time. Randy asked if it was like peyote or mescaline due to its name, but Terry assured us it was a potent distilled liquor from Oaxaca. My mother, who was at the kitchen window facing the backyard, overheard the conversation and voiced her objections to Terry as he was heading back into the house.

"I don't want you getting those boys drunk!" we heard her adamantly state.

"I'm just going to give them a taste of it." Terry said, quickly assuaging our mother's concerns.

A few minutes later he brought out two glasses, and a round, colorful, indigenous hand-painted gourd about the size of a coconut, with the word Mezcal emblazoned across it. We were fully expecting a glass bottle to normally accompany the usual accoutrements of liquor. Now this was even more mysterious, and intriguing to two teenagers in 1973. Terry went on to elucidate how he had purchased the mezcal filled gourd from an elderly man and his gourd laden burro, walking on their way to the town market. Pulling the cork from the top of the gourd, he poured a few ounces, more like a double than just a taste, into each glass for us, telling us to quaff it back, like taking a shot. As we eagerly obliged, Terry described how it was made by the locals from a type of cactus called maguey. My head shook and body shivered as I placed my empty glass down on the table at the same time as Randy.

"So, what do you think?" Terry asked.

For me, the burning sensation from my palate to my gut was too intense for immediate reply, but Randy seemed unfazed as he blew out a long, huge breath.

"Woah..." he managed to whisper quickly with his last bit of air escaping. "Nice Terry, but I think they forgot to remove the spines." Randy teased with his next breath.

A strong liquor unlike anything we'd swallowed before, but two thumbs-up were given for the fast-acting effects. Terry was chuckling at our reactions before going back inside with the empty glasses and his gourd. I suspect because neither of us asked him about the alcohol percentage nor did he volunteer to tell us that it was high, as in moonshine-percentage.

About five minutes later, Randy and I experienced a definite lack of facial sensations as a unique euphoria rapidly took over our moods. I pulled out two cigarettes from my pack and handed one to Randy. Removed a matchbook from my shirt pocket and lit a match. While eyeing my left hand putting the matches back in my pocket, I moved my right hand and match up towards Randy as he moved his head down with cigarette pursed in lips to light it. Randy suddenly burst out laughing and asked for another light. My eyes darted from my shirt pocket to my right hand, where the lit match was supposed to be, but it was gone. Randy claimed it was there one second and gone the next. It just inexplicably vanished. Could there be something more than alcohol in that gourd? I started laughing too, and though we were both temporarily bewildered at this magical disappearance, we figured I must have dropped it. After all, it was clear our neurons and some motor skills were now exponentially misfiring from the mezcal. I retrieved the book of matches from my pocket and finally lit both our cigarettes.

We smoked, chuckled, and babbled away without experiencing any further, inexplicable, magical kerfuffle. Loud howling fits of laughter were shared about the fun we were having in Space Science that year. A new class teaching the theories and facts about the universe, and the only class we had together. Both Star Trek fans with Mr. Spock being our favourite character, it was right up our alley.

Mr. Brooks, the teacher was a real 'space cadet' alright, with a blank stare behind thick horned-rim glasses. An odd, fair-haired man, who once smashed a glass foyer door by aimlessly walking into it, at least that's the claim. Randy and I would often put a hand up, to interrupt him early in his lectures with a question we knew would side-track him, pull him off on a silly but logically valid tangent until the bell sounded to end class. That was his Achilles heel. For example, in class that day, 'ol' Brooksie' was explaining relativity, the curvature of space and time. Ten minutes into the forty-minute class, Randy's hand went up in the air and caught his attention. He asks the teacher in a most articulate, logical manner - if space and time are curved, would it be logical to assume, that if one were adrift at a point in space, and had infinite distance vision, that looking straight ahead, all they'd see would be the back of their head? It evolved into other questions posited by me and others after Brooks affirmed the logic of Randy's query. If one, from a point in space, shot a bullet straight ahead, unimpeded at infinite speed, would they be committing suicide? If one traveled at infinite speed unimpeded, from a point in space, wouldn't they instantly arrive at the same starting point, like they never left? What was the point? Thirty-minutes had now passed, and the bell rang.

The mezcal was certainly augmenting the humor and wit of our banter as we continued on for some time.

It was just past 4:30pm, about an hour and a half after imbibing Terry's offerings, when my mother shouted out to Randy that his mother had called. They were having an earlier than usual supper and he should start his way home. Randy thanked my mom, told me he wasn't near as buzzed as he was an hour ago, and hastily headed home, admitting he was quite famished. The mezcal euphoria had indeed subsided, and like Randy, was stirring a strong craving for my dinner as well. The next morning at school before classes, I asked Randy how things went for

him at dinner, and did he need to hide any lingering effects of the mezcal from his family. Randy said no that it wasn't a problem at all, but at the table during the meal, he had one hell of a time explaining how a burnt match came to suddenly dislodge itself from deep up his nose and fall straight down onto his plate of food.

The Swimmer Night

Summer of 1973 hit like a fever dream; the kind of heat and humidity that made you feel like you needed a knife to cut your way through the air. Our little suburb, a grid of brick houses thrown up in the late '50s, was no match for it. Air-conditioning was new, still a rich man's game, so we all retreated to basements, those cinder-block catacombs where the air stayed cool and damp, like a cave you could smoke in. My house had the best setup — a rec-room that was the envy of every kid on the block. Wood-paneled walls, a vinyl sofa, a TV, and an eight-by-four pool table that was our altar. My parents, God bless 'em, were the cool ones. Not cool like they smoked with us — though I wouldn't put it past my dad to have tried it once — but cool like they didn't care if we stayed up till dawn while not in school, just no clacking pool balls and laughing like hyenas after 11:00 p.m. — their bedtime. My friends loved them. I'd often wake up at the crack-of-noon or later on a Saturday, saunter up the basement stairs to the kitchen to find Ken, Jeff, or any number of my friends have been there a while at the kitchen table with my mom, having coffee, smoking cigarettes and chatting away. Compared to the uptight moms and dads down the street, and some of my friends, mine were reasonably open-minded.

That night, John came over, his grin wider than usual, which meant he was packing something good. Sure enough, he pulled out a small chunk of "Indian Rope" hash, black as tar and soft enough to knead like dough. This wasn't your run-of-the-mill Lebanese or Moroccan hash; this was the kind of stuff that would glue you to the couch and make you forget your own name.

In the rec-room we smoked a joint. The sweet earthy pungent smoke from it curling around the rec-room while we shot pool. The clack of the balls was our rhythm section, the record-player spinning The Beatles' White Album in the background. By 11:00 p.m., we quit the game — because my parents were asleep upstairs. Besides, it was time for another joint and perhaps a film. We flopped onto the sofa, the vinyl material squeaking under us, and I grabbed the TV Guide to see what late-night movies were on offer while John rolled.

"Alright," I said, flipping through the dog-eared pages. "We got options. 11:30 p.m., there's The Swimmer with Burt Lancaster. Midnight, it's The Sound of Music with —"

"The Swimmer," John cut in, not even letting me finish, though no way in hell I'd choose a known musical either.

John fished out his Zippo, the metal lid snapping open with a satisfying 'clink'. A whiff of lighter fluid hit the air as he sparked the flint, lit the joint, and took a long drag. I turned on the TV, turned the channel to CBS Channel 7, the screen flickering to life. We passed the joint and ashtray back and forth while the clock ticked down to the movie's start.

That Indian Rope hit like a freight train. By the time The Swimmer kicked off, we were pinned to the couch, our bodies heavy as lead, our brains fizzing like a carbonated beverage. The

opening scene rolled, and I swear, it felt like we'd stumbled into some bizarro American version of Monty Python's Flying Circus. Burt Lancaster — Ned Merrill, in his tight little swim trunks — strutting through suburbia, all serious and square-jawed, announcing his grand plan to “swim home” by hopping from one neighbor's pool to the next. I couldn't tell if this was supposed to be profound or the dumbest thing I'd ever heard. The hash didn't help. Every line out of Lancaster's mouth sounded like it was written by a madman trying to parody a motivational speaker.

“What the fuck?” John wheezed, half-laughing, half-choking. “I'm swimming home?!”

That did it. I lost it, laughing so hard I nearly slid off the couch. John was right there with me, his face red, eyes watering, both of us caught in that perfect, delirious high where everything is hilarious and nothing makes sense. We'd been hooked on Monty Python's Flying Circus since it first aired on CBC in 1970, and this movie felt like it had been ripped straight from one of their sketches. The absurdity of it — Ned, in his swimsuit, marching from backyard to backyard, diving into pools and declaring his quest like some soggy knight — had us in stitches. Every time he said, “I'm swimming home,” we'd howl, grabbing pillows to muffle the noise so we didn't wake my parents.

The movie kept going, and so did we, riding that wave of hash-fueled hysteria. Lancaster's performance was so earnest, so intense, it looped right back around to comedic parody. The neighbors, all these prim suburban types, just nodded along like it was perfectly normal for a grown man to swim through their pools on his way home. We couldn't handle it. At one point, John tried to mimic Ned's voice, all deep and dramatic — “I'm ‘swimming’ home, man!” — and I laughed so hard I thought I'd puke. The pillows were our lifeline, stuffed against our faces to keep the noise down.

As the movie went on, though, something weird happened. Maybe it was the hash wearing off, or maybe it was the way the story started to shift, but *The Swimmer* wasn't just funny anymore. Ned's quest, which seemed so ridiculous at first, took on this strange, almost tragic edge. His neighbors started looking at him funny, like they knew something he didn't. The pools got colder, the sky got darker, and Ned — still in those damn swim trunks — started to look less like a hero and more like a guy unraveling. John and I quieted down, not because we were bored, but because the movie was pulling us somewhere we didn't expect. We still chuckled here and there, but it wasn't the same gut-busting laughter. It was nervous, like we were laughing to keep something heavier at bay.

By the end, when Ned finally stumbles “home” to a place that's not what he thought, we were silent. The TV glowed, casting shadows across the rec-room, and the joint had long since burned out in the ashtray. John leaned back, staring at the ceiling.

“Man,” he said, his voice low. “That was...fucked up.”

“Yeah,” I said, not sure what else to add. I felt like I'd just watched something I wasn't supposed to understand, not at sixteen, not yet. The hash had us flying high at the start, but *The Swimmer* brought us crashing down, not hard, but slow, like a balloon losing air.

We didn't say much after that. John crashed on the sofa and stayed overnight, and I dragged myself to bed, the hum of the TV still buzzing in my head. The next day, we joked about it — "I'm swimming home, man!" — but it wasn't the same. That night, that movie, it stuck with us, like a song you can't stop humming even when you don't know the words. We'd laugh about it for years, tell others about it who wouldn't believe us, but underneath, there was something else, something we couldn't quite name. Maybe it was just the hash. Or maybe it was Ned Merrill, swimming through our suburb, through our summer, a shadow through our lives, leaving ripples, and a wake we couldn't see coming.

The Apple Corps

It was an unseasonably warm, late September Saturday afternoon as we were strolling back after playing football with other kids in the neighborhood at Olmstead Park. We were walking down what was called Flanagan Avenue then, later to become Viewmount Drive, heading north towards Meadowlands Drive. At the corner of Flanagan and Oakridge, we stopped after laying eyes upon a luscious apple tree, proudly beaming with ripened fruit. The kind that makes your mouth water and your stomach grumble, especially after feeling parched from a few hours of tackle football. As any teenage boy worth his salt would do, we knocked on the door and politely asked the owner if we could have a few of his apples when he opened the door.

But the owner, as it turned out, was a nasty old fart, a rude bastard, impervious to manners or etiquette, who hollered at us to get off his property and never come back. We were all surprised and pissed off but took it on the chin and went on our way. However, we weren't about to let this ornery old prick have the last laugh and began planning our retribution as we continued homeward.

The snickers grew into laughter once we crossed over to our side of Meadowlands Drive and were walking past Mr. Bosio's house. Where his two Doberman Pinschers were living landmarks in the area, almost always chained on a short leash, mid-way up his laneway at the corner of Meadowlands and Creekside Avenue — now Withrow Avenue. Our imaginative, Monty Python-influenced brains were in overdrive. We'd decided to have one of our sleep-outs. Groups of us sleeping outside in backyard tents was common in those days, so there were no parental issues about getting out into the wee hours of darkness. It was from early autumn to late autumn, we'd seasonally harvest free plums, pears, and apples as they ripened from trees within a few blocks from our immediate neighborhood. Plums beside the Calderones, apples in the Guth's backyard and the Pranschke's backyard were just a few. Every fruit tree's location was known and exploited by the gang. Never doing damage to trees or property, and always only taking a few fruits from each tree. Admittedly, yes, we were stealing fruit, but we also had those ethics that we upheld. We had all our details worked out. It was such a wickedly brilliant plan that we'd hatched, we clucked like a bunch of hens in a henhouse with anticipation. It would involve us not taking any apples, not a single fruit from our targeted tree.

Later, in the dead of night, now Sunday at 3:00 a.m. and dressed in dark colors, it was zero hour, go time. So, like a well-organized group of military commandos, trained in the art of covert missions, we sneaked back to the objective tree to perform what would surely be our Magnum Opus of revenge. Quiet as church mice, but like hungry beavers in an antique furniture shop, we began chomping down on every apple we could find, from the top branches to the bottom branches. But as per our plan, we didn't bother to pluck the fruit from the tree, no sir, not even one picked. We left the cores and half-eaten apples still attached, hanging right where we found them and hastily made our retreat with nary a sound but the odd chortle of suppressed laughter.

Later that morning, we hiked by to see our masterpiece in daylight's full detail. We burst out in loud hysterical laughter, all the time fighting to keep the urine from running down the legs of our jeans. Along with an unusually pungent scent of apples permeating our noses, we saw this once-bountiful, fruit laden apple tree, was now littered with half-eaten fruit and cores, all dangling like ornaments. A glorious site!

Oh, to have been a core on that tree to see the owner's face, or even better, to have brought a camera with us and taken a photograph. Nonetheless, the priceless sight and details were permanently etched to my memory, but now in hindsight, when planning our actions, I wish one of us would've thought to bring tinsel.

Trauma

My older brother Jamie and I accompanied Ofelia, Terry's Mexican girlfriend, who was returning to Mexico in early August of 1974. It was a 3-week vacation for me before starting grade 12 but Jamie was going to stay and study at Las Bellas Artes art college in Oaxaca city. I remember after seeing his portfolio the school offered him a job teaching art to start in September .

About a week into my trip, one morning Jamie and I went for a walk with Ofelia's 10-year-old son and found ourselves at a reservoir or small lake. We sat there for a short while and Jamie started to sketch and draw the bucolic, picturesque surroundings. I felt the draw of the water on a very hot day and entered the water, in my jeans, wading and swimming a few strokes in the shallows. It was so refreshing I invited Jamie to come in, but he refused being content with drawing. After several more of my requests about checking out the water I had finally talked him into it. As he was coming in, I was heading out to dry and when I got out and turned towards the water, I could see that he was intent on a long swim as he appeared to be steadily in stroke heading way out from shore. I was suddenly filled with intense fear and anxiety from a premonition that something bad was going to happen. I wanted to scream out to my brother to come back. I couldn't! I vividly remember that I physically tried but nothing was coming out of my mouth.

The way it felt then and how I still feel and remember it was that something else was in control, like I was being used. I was frozen in fear and anxiety, unable to yell to him that I was scared and to come back. Forced to watch an impending horrific event and there was nothing I can do. The whole event is forever etched in my mind like a video. Jamie swimming away stroke after easy stroke until he suddenly stops and starts screaming "Help" loudly. I have never felt more helpless in my life. I was no longer frozen and started screaming. There was a boy that was swimming out near Jamie, and I could see him swimming towards him. He was constantly screaming help and thrashing desperately to stay up and I could see the boy try to make contact but then both seemed in trouble. The boy managed to get away and I watched in horror as my brother disappeared under the water.

I was at the scene for hours. There were boats in the water near where Jamie vanished trying to retrieve his body using big grappling hooks attached to ropes. When back at the house I went into my bedroom and sobbed uncontrollably with grief and blame for talking him into going in the water. I wanted to die. I never felt so alone and such despair in my life. It should have been me I kept thinking over and over...How did I know something was going to happen? Why was I unable to yell to him?

My oldest brother Terry came to get me, and we flew back with Jamie's ashes and urn. I was feeling frightened, anguish, and a growing blame on myself for my entire family's sorrow and loss. How would this event affect my home and family life, everything? I was no longer the

same 17-year-old that left and knew that the rest of the family would no longer be the same either.

After arrival but before getting into the car to leave the airport for home, my mother turned to me, visibly upset and with an angry outburst yelled —

"Why did you go swimming?!...I told you not to go swimming!"

My father stopped her from continuing, and I suddenly remembered my mother's last words to Jamie and I at the airport were to not go swimming. I already felt it was all my fault and my mother's reaction would hammer that into my inner self. My mother's outburst has always hurt, feeling she held me responsible. Everything was changed. I was not the same, the family dynamics were not the same, the world was not the same. Nothing was the same.

I built a heavy armored shell to hide the grief, depression, anger and suicidal thoughts. Why was I not able to openly express my feelings and emotions like before? The following weeks and months I would often hear my mother say to those inquiring how I was — "Craig is a rock". What no one would hear is my inner reply of — oh no I am not. The only thing keeping me from suicide was realizing what it would do to my parents having witnessed what Jamie's death had done and as much as I felt guilty for being alive, I couldn't hurt them. I didn't want to or couldn't express how I was really doing, not wanting to add burden to their own grief and concerns. The being a rock facade was for their sake and not my own.

Trauma Continued

Just before the end of that August, a week and a bit after returning home from Mexico, I was invited by my friend Mike from next door to go up to the family trailer on Blue Sea Lake in Quebec. The Awrey family I knew was trying to help me with the tragedy my family had incurred. Mike and I would leave Friday morning in his 1960s Volkswagen Beetle (no seat belts) and the rest of his family was arriving Saturday morning. The drive was just over an hour, so we arrived, got setup in the trailer and Mike wanted to have fun driving the hilly dirt roads in the area. He had only recently gotten both the used Beetle and his license so joyriding it was. He drove us to a dirt road that had two high peaks with dip or cleavage between them. He floored the car to climb the first incline and as we rounded the top at 60 mph (100 kmph) the sensation of a roller-coaster had us shouting in enjoyment as he continued accelerating to the next peak seconds away.

When rounding the second hilltop I could see a long steep decline going for half a mile with a large caution sign indicating a big U-curve in the road at the bottom. As we started down this incline Mike suddenly was panicking yelling there were no brakes and I could see and hear him stomping his foot repeatedly on the pedal to the floor as the car's speed increased with the steep downhill grade.

Mike yelled "hold on!" and pulled up the emergency brake lever between our seats.

At that instant the car lost control, and the sensation was being airborne and spinning. What is called rolling a vehicle in auto accident jargon.

Visually I have no record after that instant but physically I remember 3 spaced jarring impacts and my body being violently tossed about inside the car. After the third impact I had absolutely no sense of being alive or any conscious thought. I was frozen, dead until Mike's voice registered and his physically pushing at me to get out of the car for fear of it exploding, did I realize I was alive. We were crumpled together in the back seat area and crawled out via an open window. We stood on the side of the road in shock. The car was resting crumpled on its roof with the 4 wheels skyward. The roof over the driver and my front passenger seat was crushed down against the front seats. We knew had we been wearing our seatbelts, we would have been instantly killed. To look at it you would never imagine we survived with no physical injuries aside from a few cuts.

About five minutes later, a car with a good Samaritan man drove by and stopped. He spoke broken English but told us we were a miracle and had us get into his car and drove us to a hospital in the town of Maniwaki. We were looked at and found to have no injuries. Mike called his parents to tell them of the accident and he and I were OK. The police were notified of the accident and later an officer took us back to the Awrey's trailer at the lake. I remember us both purposefully keeping each other awake talking that night, afraid to fall asleep thinking we could never awaken and die if we had concussions.

In the morning when his parents arrived, after verbally chastising Mike, Mr. Awrey said to me they had not said anything to my parents, not wanting to worry them after just losing my brother. His dad took the two of us to the wreck following Mike's directions and upon seeing the state of the vehicle, his emotions were extremes of being both livid and thankful he hadn't lost a son, and my parents had not lost two sons to accidents weeks apart. Mr. Awrey took a photo of the wreck and Mike told me years later, always kept it with him.

From my present perspective it was miraculous. The car rolled end-over-end like a football kicked through the uprights going over 100 kmph. Impacting the ground with three bone crushing bounces down a steep hill, no seat belts, the doors did not jar open, nor were either of us ejected from the vehicle. I just know I remember feeling that my life and Mike's life were spared. It just wasn't our time. Revisiting all this by writing with the same feelings I had 50 years ago, has a much greater emotional impact on me than when talking with others about it. When writing I'm reliving it. I have no idea what effect the potentially fatal car accident may have had on me, but I suspect it likely augmented my trauma from just two weeks earlier in Mexico.

Post Trauma

I would become self-absorbed into my guitar and music to escape. A huge change in my social life occurred as my friends vanished because of the awkwardness in how to deal with what happened and how I was. I felt abandoned. Inside my shell was a raging fire of extreme emotions that I would express alone through playing guitar. I was spiritually angry and looking for answers. Why did God allow such a thing? The hell with God! All the religious stuff taught in summer Bible School from youth made no sense nor comfort. If God supposedly decides when we come and leave this world then why did he take Jamie? If life can be here one minute and gone the next, then it all seemed so utterly pointless. That was my attitude and sentiments then.

Music and drug experimentation would become staples and in a sense the crutches I used to get by on. This led to rekindling an old friendship with Ross, whom I knew in grade school. He also had taken up playing guitar, so we formed a band, and we grew very close after our renewed relationship. Intellectually, musically, and creatively we knew each other intimately. Looking back, he was like a brother gained as we connected on a lot of levels.

I spent a lot of time at his house the following few years after my brother's death. It was a welcome change of environment from what home on Howden Avenue had become like. I could never understand why my brother's urn was kept in the living-room where it would often draw questions from visitors as to what it was. It was for me something that would remind me of August 17, 1974, constantly. I remember it made me feel uncomfortable and bothered but I wasn't going to say anything. It obviously brought comfort to my parents, or more likely my mother, but seeing the damage that losing a child had brought on them I chose not to say anything. Feeling my mother was still angry with me, and my father was now completely emotionally shutdown so survival with life at home became walking about on eggshells concerning anything to do with my brother, our personal feelings, and what happened. It upset me to see my parents essentially spaced-out on prescribed pharmaceutical tranquilizers for a long while afterwards to cope. Again, it just added to my guilt for being the cause of such an upheaval of change and grief for my family. The open expressive self I had known, had now turned to one where feelings were suppressed and stifled. For me at that time, if I wasn't high or playing guitar there was no purpose or joy in my existence. I was spiritually disconnected, mad at the world, mad at myself, guilt for being alive was how I felt. Bombarded with questions for which there were no answers. Sleep was no escape as nightmares would plague me for almost two years in which my brother was angry at me for getting him to go into the water, or strange dreams where he was still alive at home but handicapped in varying ways. Eventually, I discovered the more hashish I smoked, the dreaming process — nightmares included — thankfully finally became suppressed.

The Blob

It was in 1975 that I finally was accepted for seasonal employment in the federal government with what was then called Revenue Canada -- Data Centre, on Heron Road. The Feds being Ottawa's largest career employer. The private industry, aside from E.B. Eddy and R.L. Crain, didn't exist in comparison with Toronto or any other city. Most of my friends, Ken, Pete, John, to name a few, were already working there from the previous tax season. My introduction to "The Blob" as my brother Terry called it. Likely inspired by the science-fiction movie of the same name from his youth. A mindless entity that will absorb you, trap you into its mundane, nonsensical, and vacuous ways, capable of the utter destruction of a rational mind. As I would later discover, his words concerning the federal civil service were not hyperbolic.

I was working an evening shift with a group predominantly of young people my own age. It was truly mindless work and seemed more like these were excuses for jobs rather than there being an actual need for them at all, if things were done sensibly. At any rate, my first encounter with The Blob led to a friendship with my co-worker Dan who sat across from me. Dan was the same age, long hair like me, and had a sharp sarcastic wit to accompany his refined self-deprecating humor. I say refined because Dan was confined to a wheelchair. The result of an early childhood accident. The two of us always bantered with humor to palliate the mindlessness of the job. Always taking our breaks outside to smoke a few cigarettes and enjoy getting to know each other. It was during one of these smoke breaks that Dan told me one of the funniest jokes I had ever heard. Brilliant, stands on its own in concept, but there's the added impact of Dan being the teller of the joke. Keeping that in mind, read on:

"In the Middle East, there were three men traveling through the desert. Lifelong friends, one was deaf and mute, the second was blind, the third was lame and confined to a wheelchair. They were heading to a nearby village along a route they had taken many times before when something extraordinary happened.

As they were making their way through the barren terrain that they knew like the proverbial backs of their hands, they suddenly came across a shallow oasis. It was only shin-deep with turquoise clear water and had a hard, smooth bottom. They knew this was something that should not be there. They stopped by the edge, admiring its beauty, and wondered if it was perhaps a mirage or some other trick from the heat. Do they go across it? Do they go around it? There was some hesitancy and a bit of trepidation about what they were dealing with. Perhaps it was a test of their faith over fear.

The deaf-mute man, however, decided to test reality and started to slowly wade through the water to cross to the other side. His two companions were in awe as he stepped out of the water on the far side of the oasis and started to deliriously jump up and down. Miraculously, he was yelling out loud, praising God, that he could now speak and hear!

The former deaf-mute man now yelled out to the blind man to follow his voice, and wade across to him. The blind man hesitated at first but eventually stepped out into the water and made his way across. Like the man before him, when he stepped out of the oasis, he too began leaping about in hysterical joy, praising God, because he could now see!

The two men beckoned to their friend in the wheelchair to come across. Now with excited haste and high expectations, his muscular arms created enough speed to leave two rooster-tails of water in his wake as he powered his chair pell-mell across the oasis in the direction of his two friends who loudly cheered him on.

As soon as he got to the other side, something extraordinary had happened for him as well. His wheelchair now had two shiny, brand spanking new, polished-chrome wheels on it!"

I think of Dan from time to time and our many smoke-breaks, the many laughs shared. He earned my respect because he'd have had every right to be bitter about life, but instead he was jocular, and as affable as one could ever be. A source of light, from the shadows.

Eulogy For John

John Cole Donald, my best friend of 60 years, was a constant in my life — a brother in all but blood. We shared laughter, sorrow, secrets, and silences, including the last 3 and a half years since the autumn of 2021. But our friendship, forged in the reckless joy of youth, allowed for such pauses. But on the morning of May 3, 2025, a text from John broke that silence:

“Hello my friend. Been thinking about you. We should get together SOON to catch up.”

My heart sank. I immediately knew something was seriously wrong, his having capitalized 'soon' was ominous. I quickly texted back —

"Your text was a welcomed surprise! I'll be out this afternoon my old friend."

When I got there Beth let me in and John was lying flat on the sofa in his night robe. Warm greetings and he then reveals the surgery scars and staples across his lower abdomen just above the pubic area. I suspected six years ago and suggested to him he likely had PAD (Peripheral Arterial Disease) as he suffered pain (claudication) and couldn't walk any distance without insane pain in his leg. He would tell me it's back or sciatic nerve pain probably and brush it off.

Well, it was indeed PAD — Peripheral Arterial Disease. John had the surgery putting two stents in to bypass his femoral arteries to his legs. He told me this was on the 18th of April, and he was supposed to be released on the 21st but he was having digestive issues, so they ran more tests keeping him in extra days and released him home on April 28. Then after a pause, he started crying and said they found a 10cm tumor in his left lung, spots on his liver, and lymph nodes. Spent the rest of the day and evening helping him decipher his medical results and lab tests from medical lingo to regular English. He hadn't seen a thoracic oncologist yet, was waiting for that as they did a biopsy while he was kept an inpatient to be able to do all tests quickly, otherwise months would go by. He was obviously concerned but I showed where his tests indicated they found no metastasis to his brain, bones, or any other organs etc. When I left, he was in decent spirits, realizing there's nothing to do until he sees an oncologist and the gets the results of his biopsy. Told him I'd touch base with him Monday. So yesterday I texted and got a reply a few hours later -it was from Beth at the hospital saying he took a turn for the worse Sunday morning. She had to call an ambulance, and he was readmitted to the General Hospital. Said she'd call me later in the evening. That didn't happen; however, she called me at 6:00 this morning to fill me in.

On Sunday at the hospital, it was discovered that part of his bowel had died and was going gangrenous. They surgically removed it but during the surgery his blood pressure dropped to a point of near death, so they stopped, put him in the critical care unit, hooked up a pile of IV lines – Hydromorphone and a drug to keep his blood pressure up.

They told John the prognosis for advanced PAD and a bowel infarction (tissue death from no blood flow) is poor, with 30-day mortality of 50–80%. Survivors face high morbidity, and outcomes remain grim at best. He wasn't going to get out of the hospital. The PAD was too advanced, and his bowel was just the first organ. His other organs will all be at jeopardy. The cancer issue thus became a redundant matter.

Beth said when he fully understood his situation — that advanced PAD alone was terminal, already lost a bowel, and now Stage Four lung cancer, he had Beth get Sam and Jennifer, all the grandkids, his sons-in-law to have a heart to heart with them all. He had decided it made no sense to continue with the pain and the hand he was dealt. After, as Beth put it, a wonderful job of communicating his pride and love for them all saying his goodbyes. After they left and Beth was there with the doctors, they were going to adjust the IVs, so he'd comfortably drift away but he stopped them — this is where Beth started crying while explaining to me — she said John told her and the doctors "I want to see Craig. I am not going until I see my best bud."

So, I went in to do God's work. I had to look at it that way to keep my strength and composure to face such intense emotional impact. Spent over two hours with John holding his hand. Beth and kids let John, and I have alone time, so we really talked, expressed our gratitude for our 60-year friendship, that we loved each other, that I respected his decision, and it was okay for him to go. I queried him —

"You of course remember the movie The Swimmer, John?"

A reference to a 1968 strange movie called The Swimmer that John and I watched in 1973 at my place. On TV down in the rec-room after indulging in some of India's finest hashish. About a character who tells everybody throughout the movie — "I'm swimming home" as he uses their pools to swim home. Just bizarre to watch and hilarious for two 16-year-olds. All throughout the years it would come up because John said Beth, really nobody, ever believed him there was such a movie when he'd share our experience of watching it and trying to figure out the plot.

He gave a weak smirk and said — "Yeah,"

"I re-watched it after finding it online last night." — I told him — "when you decide it's time you want to go, just swim home, you're swimming home."

When it was time for me to leave, I let go of his hand, gently cupped the sides of his face with both my hands and asked —

"Can you see me, John?"

He said yes and I told him for the last time I loved him, was going to miss him, and he echoed the same back. I kissed him on the forehead and thanked him for the opportunity to share our sentiments and a proper goodbye, granting each of us, with our sixty-year lifelong friendship, closure.

Later that evening at 8:45 p.m., sunset hour, I received a text from Beth, his devoted wife of nearly 50 years, stating —

"Just wanted to let you know, John is swimming home."
